

# philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS  
(1872 – 1958)

## Symphony No. 5 in D

- I. *Preludio: moderato*
- II. *Scherzo: presto*
- III. *Romanza: lento*
- IV. *Passacaglia: moderato*

Vaughan Williams's Fifth Symphony, dedicated to Sibelius, was first performed at a Promenade Concert in London on 24 June 1943, in the midst of the Second World War, when the composer conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra. But it had been a long time in the making. Some of the themes were composed years earlier as part of a projected opera based on Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In 1938 it seemed to Vaughan Williams that he would never finish the opera (eventually he completed it and it was performed at Covent Garden in 1951) so he diverted these themes into a new symphony. Even then their adventures were not over. In July 1938 he provided music, for military band and chorus, for a Surrey village pageant called *England's Pleasant Land*. Two items, 'Exit of the ghosts of the past' and 'Funeral March for the Old Order' were to achieve final shape in the *Scherzo* and *Preludio* of the symphony. There is significance here, for although the serenity and spiritual tranquillity of the symphony make a predominant impact on the listener, beneath the apparently calm surface there are harmonic tensions and dissonances which indicate that all is not quite as it seems and that a lament for the passing of an age may be discerned here as clearly as in Elgar's Second Symphony. The links with *The Pilgrim's Progress* occur in all the movements apart from the *Scherzo* but have no dramatic connection except in the *Romanza*, which was originally headed by a quotation from Bunyan. Its beautiful cor anglais theme is sung in the opera to the words: 'He hath given me rest by his sorrow and life by his death'. The horn-call which opens the symphony sets the scene for the generally 'other-worldly' atmosphere and returns on the full orchestra at the climax of the *Finale* before the peaceful *Epilogue*, which has the air of a benediction. Although the music epitomises what might be called 'the Englishness of English music', the attentive listener to the scoring will not fail to notice the influence of Ravel, with whom Vaughan Williams studied in 1908. This is particularly evident in the *Scherzo*. The symphony is scored for a conventional orchestra, with no exotic instruments and timpani the only percussion. There is no harp.

In spite of the dedication, the listener who seeks resemblances to the style and method of Sibelius will not find much to justify his zeal. One obvious similarity, though, is that each began his fifth symphony with a horn-call. Played in D major by two horns above low Cs on cellos and basses, this call dominates a movement in which Vaughan Williams is at pains to emphasise the vagueness, one might say instability, of its tonality. D major is established only by (in Frank Howes's graphic phrase) "gravitational pull". The tonal centre is either D with a flattened seventh or occasionally C with a raised fourth, both being modal in character. A thrilling change into E major for the second subject affirms the aspiring mood of the symphony, which to some degree resembles the 'Alleluia' motif from his hymn-tune 'For all the saints'. An *allegro* middle section is more troubled and is dominated by a three-note figure containing a flattened second which is repeated like a warning by one woodwind instrument after another. The music becomes suddenly tempestuous, with *tremolando* strings - I suppose this passage is really rather Sibelian - and subsides into a return of the horn-call and a recapitulation of the principal material, dying away to two held notes, D on violas and C on cellos.

The fleeting *Scherzo* begins with a pentatonic figure on the lower strings but is notable for the explosive brass and croaking woodwind. It is built from several short themes, irregular in rhythm and contrasting in mood. The general atmosphere is one of uneasiness, suggesting grinning gargoyles or perhaps Bunyan's 'hobgoblin and foul fiend', but eventually a syncopated figure on the strings lengthens into a yearning cantabile theme. After an abbreviated recapitulation, the movement peters out.

The slow movement is closest in spirit and substance to the music of the opera. Triads on the strings introduce the tranquil cor anglais theme in C. A polyphonic passage for strings is followed by rising and falling chords with woodwind arabesques. Then the polyphony returns, more fully orchestrated and ending with another Alleluia-like motif. An agitated episode is calmed by a solo horn playing the cor anglais melody. This material is repeated but in a varied form culminating in an impassioned Alleluia. Thenceforward all is calm and the movement ends in A major.

The *Finale*, a *Passacaglia*, begins in D major. The theme is played by cellos and is followed by a counter-theme which again sounds like Alleluia but was said by the composer to be more like 'The First Nowell'. Take your pick. In the variations which follow, the 'Nowell' motif is a dominant feature, contrasted with a *scherzando* and really quite jolly version of the *Passacaglia* theme. A fragment of this tune is repeated several times to herald the inevitable return of the horn-calls from the start of the symphony, a climactic moment which may recall a similar moment in Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* to some keen-eared listeners. Another motif from the first movement inaugurates the symphony's epilogue. Henceforward the composer uses no accidentals and the music achieves an other-worldly calm and benediction, the basses ending in the depths of D, the upper strings climbing to some celestial A.

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